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## The Qur'anic Epic in Iranian Cinema

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# The Qur'anic Epic in Iranian Cinema

## Abstract

The representation of religious figures in Islam has become particularly controversial in recent years. The creation of religious films has, therefore, turned into a highly sensitive undertaking. Iranian cinema is one of the very few in the Muslim world to have employed this new medium in imagining and narrating stories of revered religious figures. In this article I examine the complex socio-political context of Iran to study the relatively late emergence of the epic genre in Iranian cinema. I then study the recent creation and development of 'Qur'anic Films' within Iranian cinema with specific reference to *Kingdom of Solomon* (*Mulk-i Sulayman-i Nabi*, Shahriar Bahrani, 2010), which I argue is the first Qur'anic epic in Iranian cinema if not in the Muslim world. The article also draws from the Iranian television series *Imam Ali* (Davud Mirbaqeri, 1997) in examining the ways in which Iranian filmmakers negotiate the balance between religious authenticity and dramatic effectiveness.

## Keywords

Epic cinema, Qur'an, Iran, Muslim religious films, Qur'anic epic

## Author Notes

Dr Nacim Pak-Shiraz is the Head of Persian Studies and Senior Lecturer in Persian and Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh. She is the author of *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London, 2011) and a number of articles and chapters in the field of Iranian Film Studies. Dr. Pak-Shiraz also regularly collaborates with a number of film festivals, including the Edinburgh International Film Festival and The Edinburgh Iranian Festival. She would like to thank The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for awarding her a Small Research Grant, which enabled her to undertake the fieldwork for this research.

The production of Biblical films almost immediately followed the birth of cinema. Pathe's productions of *The Birth of Jesus* (1909), *Life of Christ* (1910) and C.G.P.C's Biblical releases *Cain and Abel* (1911), *Infancy of Moses* (1911) and *Abraham's Sacrifice* (1912) are a few early examples. Jon Solomon outlines the audience's familiarity with the Bible and Latin texts as well as the popularity of antiquity "in contemporary theatrical, literary, and educational worlds at the end of the nineteenth century" (2001: 3), as a natural choice for the pioneers of cinema in the West. Moreover, these narratives with their "magnificent spectacle", "seductive royalty" and "biblical revolutionaries" made for excellent filmic material (Solomon, 2001:1).

Qur'anic films and the epic genre more broadly in Iranian cinema are, however, relatively recent developments. In addition to the scarcity of the required financial and technical resources, Iranian epics need to be studied within the particular socio-political context from which they emerged. The representation of religious figures in Islam has become particularly controversial in recent years. Whilst medieval illustrated manuscripts from the Muslim world demonstrate the existence of these depictions within their cultural practices, contemporary debates on the topic have been dominated by an amnesiac denial of the existence or permissibility of these depictions within Islam. The creation of religious films has, therefore, turned into a highly sensitive undertaking, evident in the very small number of such films produced by Muslim countries. This has also affected the screenings of recent Western biblical epics in these countries, many of which banned them on various grounds, including the representation of prophets, forbidden in Islam.<sup>1</sup> However, some cinemas within the Muslim world have employed

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<sup>1</sup> Ridley Scott's *The Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) was banned in Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/26/egypt-bans-hollywood-exodus-christian-bale> and <http://gulfnews.com/life-style/celebrity/hollywood/exodus-will-not-release-in-the-uae-1.1432595> . Similarly, the screening of the Paramount Production of *Noah* (Darren Aronofsky, 2014) in Egypt faced much opposition from al-Azhar, that criticised the film for the "personal characterization" of Noah,

this new medium in imagining and narrating stories of revered religious figures. This article will first study the emergence of Iranian epics as a genre with a particular focus on religious epics. It will then examine the ways in which Iranian filmmakers have negotiated the balance between religious authenticity and dramatic effectiveness in their films. Here, I will examine the Iranian television series *Imam Ali* (Davud Mirbaqeri, 1997) and *Kingdom of Solomon* (*Molk-e Soleyman*, Shahriar Bahrani, 2010), the latter of which I argue is the first Qur'anic epic in Iranian cinema and arguably in the Muslim world.

### Emergence of Iranian Epics

In the Western context, the prevailing popularity of biblical storylines eased the transition of familiar ancient themes from theatre to cinema. It also meant that early filmmakers could draw from the theatre resources at their disposal such as costumes, props and sets to make films about the ancient world. Sidney Olcott, one of the directors of the first version of *Ben Hur* made in 1907, for example “grabbed an armload of Metropolitan Opera costumes to outfit his limited cast at Manhattan’s Battery Park” (Solomon, 2001:5). Within the Iranian context, however, the tradition of drama in its “formal Western terms [is] a relatively new art form” even though “various types of dramatic performance, including religious plays and humorous satirical skits have long been a part of Persian religious and folk tradition” (Ghanoonparvar, 1996).

*Ta'ziyeh* is one of the most significant traditional performing arts of Iran, also referred to as the “Shi'i Passion play” in Western literature (Chelkowski, 1984:45).

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which is “prohibited in Islamic Shariah... and constitutes a clear violation of the principles of Islamic law stipulated by the Constitution.” (al-Azhar quoted in Al-Arabiya). See <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/03/06/Egypt-s-Azhar-prohibits-screening-of-Noah.html>

These performances re-enact the events that led to the death of Husayn b. 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Shi'i imam, in 680. The earliest recorded *ta'ziyeh* performance dates back to the eighteenth century in Iran (Beyzaie, 2001: 117). *Ta'ziyeh* reached its peak during the rule of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-1896) when it enjoyed royal patronage. In 1869, the Shah commissioned the building of Takiyeh Dowlat, an impressive edifice modelled on The Royal Albert Hall after his visit to London. Actors' costumes fashioned from expensive cloth and real gems, many of which were made under the supervision of the royal women, were borrowed from the Royal Harem for the *ta'ziyeh* (Hodayyuni, 2001: 94). Takiyeh Dowlat became the greatest Iranian playhouse with a capacity of approximately 20,000 people. Audiences would be dazzled by the splendour of the venue, the magnificent costumes and the immense stage that could not only accommodate large groups of actors but also large animals such as camels and horses (Beyzaie, 2001). Following Solomon (2001), who makes this observation for the nineteenth-century Western context, aspects of *ta'ziyeh* such as spectacle, and the revolutionary and suffering figure of Husayn would make for excellent filmic material. Despite this parallel, however, the influence of Iranian traditional theatre on early Iranian films is not comparable to that of Western theatre on early Western films.

Even though the earliest Iranian moving images had captured *ta'ziyeh* performances, they remained unknown to the general public until the 1980s when the footage was discovered in the Golestan Palace. Unlike in the West, the introduction of filmmaking was not a public event. In 1900, the Qajar king, Mozzafar al-Din Shah (r. 1896-1907), commissioned his photographer Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi to buy a moving picture camera after his trip to the West. Akkasbashi recorded "Muzzafar al-Din Shah's daily life – significantly, the monarch's hunting expeditions – together with

motion picture recordings of the Shah's participation in official, secular and religious ceremonies, images of the royal menageries and of scenes from ta'ziyeh performances" (Mottahedeh, 2008: 113). However, this footage was only screened within the private confines of the court and proved immaterial to the shaping of Iranian cinema. In contrast, in the West, just two years after the invention of the cinematograph, two cinematic presentations of the passion play were produced in 1897: *The Passion of Christ*, filmed in Paris, and the American production filmed in Bohemia entitled *The Hortiz Passion Play* (Walter Freeman). Following the success of the American production, *The Original Oberammergau Passion Play* (Henry Wincent) was produced in New York a year later in 1898. Baugh credits this as an important film "in film-history and in the history of the religious film because it was one the first examples of a recreated or refictionalized version of a historical event in film" (1997: 9). It was not simply the cinematic presentations of passion plays that made it into films from very early on. The cinematic Christ-figure can be traced back to as early as 1916 in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* with cinematic metaphors of innocent victims of human cruelty. In the Iranian context, however, the first moving images of the Iranian passion plays, ta'ziyeh, did not play the same role in the Iranian film history.

By the time cinema had emerged in Iran, ta'ziyeh had lost its royal endorsement. Reza Shah (r. 1921-1941), the first Pahlavi ruler, opposed the performance as backward and contradictory to his modernising project. Takiyeh Dowlat was subsequently demolished and ta'ziyeh was pushed to the rural margins. As such, Iranian drama in both its weakened traditional form and newly introduced modern incarnation had very little to offer to cinema when it came to ancient themes. Other than a few exceptions, such as Mirzade Eshqi's *Resurrection of Iranian Kings* (*Rastakhiz-e Salatin-e Iran*, 1916), "a well-acclaimed but naive and sentimental opera poem which... invoked the

ghosts of famous ancient kings like Cyrus, Darius, Chosroes I, and even Zoroaster” (Ghaffari, 1984: 377) not many ancient themes in modern plays have been recorded in the early twentieth century. Unlike in the Judaeo-Christian context, which enjoyed a vibrant cultural scene of religious and ancient-themed performances when cinema first emerged, the religious and traditional society of Iran, ironically lacked the same.

The public introduction of cinema in Iran faced a very different reception from its Western counterpart. The first Iranian cinemas, such as the one that opened in Tehran in 1904 was forced to close only a month after its opening. From the beginning, one of the main oppositions came from the clergy and the traditional strata of society. Cinema, they argued, was anti-religious and corrupting, and had to be avoided by Muslim believers. The medium was considered incompatible with the principles of the faith. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the pioneers of Iranian cinema hailed mainly from religious minorities, with the first films made by Avanes Ohanians, a Christian, and Abdolhossein Sepanta, a Zoroastrian. Unlike the early Western titles, none of their films were about historical or religious figures. Instead, they reflected the concerns of a traditional society encountering modernity. As such, there were a number of factors that contributed to the absence of early Iranian films about the prophets or the Shi‘i imams. These included the lack of a strong tradition of religious performing arts that could influence the early Iranian films, vehement opposition to the medium itself, and the disinterest of early Iranian filmmakers in creating “religious films.”

It was not until the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini’s approval of cinema as an educational tool on the first day of his return to Iran in 1979, that religiosity and cinema were no longer regarded as mutually exclusive (Tapper, 2002:6). However, the Islamic Republic’s initial ambition to create an ‘Islamic Cinema’ was doomed to failure.



Transforming an entire national cinema into a particular genre proved impossible to achieve. Indeed, the very definition of what constituted “Islamic Cinema” became fraught with disagreements across the spectrum of filmmakers, critics, religious authorities and those within the industry (Pak-Shiraz, 2011). Moreover, by the mid-1990s when Iranians began to have access to illegal satellite programmes, the industry was faced with the additional challenge of maintaining audience interest when much of the banned material became available to Iranian viewers. However, even if the project of “Islamic Cinema” had initially appeared to fail the recent productions of religious epics, such as *Kingdom of Solomon* (Shahriar Bahrani, 2010), suggest that the ambition itself was never aborted. Instead, the state redirected its efforts of achieving an “Islamic Cinema” into the development of a particular genre, films with explicit Islamic themes. Being subject to the strict rules and regulations of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance might have “Islamicised” post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema in what it could and could not depict but it became readily apparent that not every film produced in the country could be categorised as Islamic cinema.

Whereas Christian cinematic themes were born alongside cinema itself, the emergence in Iran of a clearly Qur’anic theme or the genre of the epic itself occurred long after the development of Iranian cinema. In fact, it is not until the third decade after the Revolution that Religious and Qur’anic epics appear in Iranian cinema. A few films based on religious and ancient Iranian stories were made before the Revolution such as *Yusuf and Zuleykha* (Siyamak Yasemi, 1956 and Mehdi Rai’s *Firooz*, 1968) and *Bijan and Manijeh* (Manuchehr Zamani, 1958). Each of these films drew their storylines very loosely from stories inspired by the Qur’an and the *Shahnameh*, the tenth-century Persian epic, respectively. However, the gravitas of the story’s origins did very little to the approach in making these films. Instead, they were simply another addition to the body

of the pre-Revolutionary commercial films, known as *filmfarsi*, a term initially coined to criticise the poor quality of local productions (Abdi, 1999: 171). *Filmfarsi* directors drew their film plots from these popular storylines, turning them into marketable romantic flicks. They cast *filmfarsi* stars and retained the signature *filmfarsi* song and dance sequences to attract audiences. The director of the 1956 *Yusef and Zuleykha*, Siyamak Yasemi, was a prolific *filmfarsi* director, screenwriter and producer, whose *Qarun's Treasure* (1965) became one of the most successful productions of *filmfarsi*, starring the popular actress Foruzan who played as Zuleykha in Rai's Firooz's 1968 version of *Yusef and Zuleykha*. In short, making a film about a prophet did not open doors to any additional resources that could enable filmmakers to create a new genre such as the epic film. Instead, they had to operate within the same limitations of *filmfarsi* productions.

Sadr refers to the period between 1956-1969 as “the most productive period for the Iranian pseudo-historical adventure” during which twenty such films were produced (2006: 58-59). Scholars of Iranian cinema, he argues, have either ignored or despised these “hyper-formalistic and excessive epics” because “their function is seen as essentially in bad taste and their historical depictions anachronistic”, and “the genre is generally regarded as a suspect form of cinematic representation” (Sadr, 2006: 59). These pre-Revolutionary “pseudo-historical adventure films”, however, lack many of the formal elements of the epic film outlined by Constantine Santas (2008: 29-32), most notably spectacle, length and multiple plots. As such, the very attribution of “epic films” to these productions is debatable. In fact, it is safe to say that pre-Revolutionary Iranian cinema did not create any epic films.

The first Qur'anic epic was made 110 years after the first Iranian moving images were filmed by Akkasbashi, and 102 years after the first epic film was produced. Solomon (2001) attributes the birth of epic cinema to the work of the Italian filmmaker,

Arturo Ambrosio, for his making of *The Last Days of Pompei* (1908) in his Turin Studios. He argues that even though a “respectable number of films based on ancient characters or themes was produced in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, the virtual birth not only of the ancient world in cinema but also of the epic cinema as we know it occurred in 1908” (Solomon, 2001: 4) In comparison to Western cinema, Iranian cinema had very few films that drew directly from the Qur’an or other religious narratives.

After the Revolution, a number of television programmes based on religious figures, particularly the Shi’a imams, were made with *Imam Ali* (Davud Mirbaqeri, 1997), becoming one of the most successful productions of this genre. Other productions soon followed suit, such as *The Loneliest Warrior* (*Tanhatarin Sardar*, Mehdi Fakhimzadeh, 1997), *Custodian of Love* (*Velayat-e ‘Eshq*, Mehdi Fakhimzadeh, 2000) and *Mukhtarnameh* (Davud Mirbaqeri, 2010-2011) but none attained the same popularity as *Imam Ali* (discussed further below). Even fewer television programmes were made on stories based on the Qur’an. *The Men of Angeles* also known as *The Companions of the Cave* or *Seven Sleepers* (*Mardan-e Angeles*, Farajollah Salahshur, 1998) is a notable example of a television series based on the Qur’anic story of the “companions of the cave” who slept for some 300 years. It was only in the new millennium that several big budget films and television series, deriving their stories from the Qur’an were produced. These included *Saint Mary* (*Maryam-e Moqadas*, Shahriar Bahrani, 2002), *Abraham the Messenger* (*Ebrahim Khalilullah*, Mohammadreza Varzi, 2005), *The Messiah* (*Besharat-e Munji*, Nader Talebzadeh, 2007), *Joseph the Prophet* (*Yusef-e Payambar*, Farajollah Salahshur, 2008) and *Kingdom of Solomon* (Shahriar Bahrani, 2010). Some of these television series also had an abridged feature-length film that would be released either before or after the television broadcast. For example, a feature-length version of

*The Messiah* (2007) preceded the television broadcast of the series and there are plans to release a feature-length version of *Joseph* (2008) following the television series.

*Kingdom of Solomon*, which I discuss in detail later, is the first Iranian Qur'anic film. The most expensive film made until 2010, its budget was approved and obtained outside the usual channels as it was secured through the Majlis, the Iranian parliament. In 2004, the Deputy of Cinematic Affairs, Mohammad Mehdi Heydarian, had proposed the making of a *fakher* or “grand film”, though this was translated as “big production” by many Iranians, including its producer (*Fars News*, 2010b). The Majlis approved the budget for the making of *fakher* films, contributing the lion's share of the five-billion-toman budget (*Fars News*, 2010b). It was one of the first big productions within Iran and employed Digital Intermediate (DI) and Computer Generated Images (CGI). Many of the special effects, being new to Iranian cinema, were undertaken by a Hong Kong studio. Press releases of the film revealed its initial ambitions at reaching audiences beyond Iran. Indeed, the Arabic and Urdu-dubbed versions, with over three million viewers on YouTube alone, not only reinforce the idea of the film's ambitions to attract audiences beyond Iran but also validate a universality that can appeal to the Sunni Muslim majority.

### **The Challenge of Religious Authenticity and Dramatic Effectiveness**

The glamour and spectacle of Hollywood epics might at first glance appear contradictory to Iranian cinema, monitored as it is by strict moral codes. Nevertheless, both cinemas share similar concerns in their engagement with scripture and religious narratives through film. Within Western cinema, Solomon highlights the difficulties of “find[ing] a delicate balance between historical authenticity and dramatic effectiveness” (Solomon, 2001: 25) especially when it came to topics with which audiences are either familiar or

of which they may have an intimate knowledge regarding their subject and character. As such, he concludes, if the film gave preference to historicity, this could result in “uncinematic reverence” and if dramatic effectiveness became the preferred lens then the film could lead to absurdity. This is a challenge Iranian filmmakers also face when making films about religious characters and/or events.

Maintaining the balance between entertainment and religious authenticity contributed to much of the success of the *Imam Ali* television series mentioned earlier. But making a film about one of the most revered Shi‘i imams within the Islamic Republic of Iran was itself a challenging undertaking. Tatum enumerates four elements of what he calls “the problem of the cinematic Jesus” (Tatum, 1997: 6). These include the artistic, the literary, the historical and the theological. The artistic problem refers to cinema as an art form with its own demands, as well as the preconception of the viewers about Jesus. The literary problem alludes to the various portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels, and the limited information they provide on Jesus and his outer life, with almost nothing about his motivations and private life. The historical problem revolves around the distinction between the Christ of faith and Jesus as a historical figure. Finally, the theological problem concerns the faith claims made by a Jesus film which should align itself with the theological sources and the subsequent complications that might arise in instances where a film deviates from the scripture or Christian tradition (Tatum, 1997: 6-12). Applying Tatum’s categories of “the problem of the cinematic Jesus” to films about Ali, the first Shi‘i Imam, I argue that filmmakers faced the problem of the “cinematic Ali” that was specific to the Shi‘i and Iranian context. These included the pre-conceptions of Shi‘i believers about Ali, his portrayals in the different Shi‘i and Sunni sources, the distinction between Ali as a historical figure and a divinely appointed leader, and the film’s political and theological alignments. Making a film

about one of the most venerated characters of Shi'i Islam on whom centuries of religious and historical narratives have been compiled was no easy feat. Moreover, not only did the film have to comply with the Islamic Republic's codes of filmmaking, the filmmakers had the additional challenge of making a film about a central character without depicting him.

*Imam Ali* was one of the first significant Iranian religious television epics that not only received the endorsement of the authorities within the Islamic Republic but was also hugely successful with audiences. Mirbaqeri, who had previously directed a number of successful commercial films including the controversial *Snowman* (1994),<sup>2</sup> addressed the challenges of making a film about Imam Ali in a number of ways. From the time that Mirbaqeri submitted the first draft of his screenplay to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in 1991, to when the first of the twenty-two episodes was broadcast in 1997, the film underwent a number of iterations, including the rewriting of the script (*Jahan News*, 2010). Whilst the stories surrounding Imam Ali's life, particularly his heroism, magnificence, and the numerous challenges to his authority are well known to Iranian audiences living under the Islamic Republic, the film chose to also focus on some lesser-known characters to narrate these events. One of these was the character of Qotam, known as Qatami in the sources (Vaglieri, 2015). The film depicted Qotam as a seductress, determined to avenge the death of her father and brother who were killed in the battle of Nahrawan. Whilst Ibn Moljam Moradi was well known to audiences as Ali's assassin, they were not familiar with either Qotam or her role in assisting Ali's opponents in plotting his murder. Qotam uses her sexuality

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<sup>2</sup>*Snowman* was one of the first post-Revolutionary films to depict a transvestite character, a man desperate to leave Iran disguising himself as a woman in the hope of obtaining an American visa. The film was banned for many years before its public release in 1997, when Mohammad Khatami became president.

to recruit both Ibn Moljam and Wardan to undertake the murder. The characterisation of the femme fatale Qotam, with her striking beauty and intelligence, became one of the main attractions of the film, and turned her into an all-time favourite Iranian screen villain.<sup>3</sup> Her character became crucial in dramatising the film and providing suspense for a storyline whose ending was all too familiar for viewers living in a context that has mourned and commemorated the death of Ali for centuries.

In an interview a year before the broadcast of the series, Mirbageri stated that eighty per cent of the film was fiction, which he had derived from his understanding of the Islamic historical sources. Despite this, however, he argued that the film had not strayed too far from these sources (*Jahan News*, 2010). In the subsequent VCD release, the series began with an announcement before the opening credits that after a few episodes of the series had been aired, there were a number of enquiries from audience members regarding the sources used for the screenplay. It went on to state that as it was impossible to enumerate all the sources used, so only a selection were highlighted. It then listed 28 sources, ranging from sources considered authentic by both Shi‘as and Sunnis, to foundational Sunni literature and pivotal Shi‘i texts.<sup>4</sup> The list thus made a clear claim to the film’s authenticity, not only within the Shi‘i context but also that of the wider Muslim world, particularly in its reference to sources considered authentic within the Sunni context. Whether the compilation of the list was a response to concerns from religious authorities within or outside Iran or simply from ordinary believers or

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<sup>3</sup> Almost twenty years since the broadcast of the television series in 1997, Vishka Asayesh is still known for her role in this film.

<sup>4</sup> These included the “*sahih*” or “sound” hadith collections of Bukhari and Muslim b. Hajjaj, Tabari’s *History of the World*, *The Nahj al-Balagha*, saying attributed to the first Shi‘i imam, Ali, Baqir al-Majlisi’s *Bihar al-Anwar*, which served as one of the ‘main sources for...imami scholarship’ (Gleave, 2015) and the *Musnad*, the hadiths collected by Ahmad b. Hanbal.

viewers, what is certain is that the film had subsequently identified a need to claim the legitimacy of its narrative by locating itself within these “authentic discourses.”

*Imam Ali* was also one of the first Iranian television programmes to successfully experiment with special effects, even if its scope was rather limited. The first episode opened with special effects to depict the sorcery of a Jewish man who turns a prisoner into a dog and back into a human being for the amusement of the corrupt governor of Kufa. This use of technology, along with the popular film score, made for a very strong opening that succeeded in capturing audience attention from the outset. The Jewish man – another highly fictionalised character – and the use of special effects exemplifies how the form was utilised in narrating the content. Solomon maintains that since film is “art and not document” (2001: 30), minor compromises of historicity are acceptable to the overall result of the film. *Imam Ali*’s success, therefore, can largely be attributed to these compromises, treading carefully as it did between historicity, religious imperatives, state sanctions, believers’ sensitivities and the demands of the medium itself.

Another television series that followed shortly after *Imam Ali* was Mehdi Fakhimzadeh’s *The Loneliest Warrior* (1997) based on the life of the second Shi‘i imam, Hasan b. Ali. The long list of historical and religious sources as well as scholars in the original credits of the programme who were stated to have been consulted, aimed to establish the authenticity of the film. However, the emphasis on historical authenticity in leading the narrative did not succeed in attracting audiences and the series came nowhere close to the popularity of *Imam Ali*. On the other hand, however, a film’s sole reliance on entertainment, with little regard for scripture, history or mythology can be equally detrimental. Citing American productions such as *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *The Fury of Hercules* (1962), and the TV mini series *Cleopatra* (1999) Solomon argues that these films “turn the Old Testament, Greek mythology, and



Roman history for the most part into romantic and military mishmash, erasing the historicity of the characters” and ultimately turning the drama into “a mere pageant of unheroic characters” (2001: 27). In the same vein, one of the reasons that filmfarsi’s attempts, as discussed earlier, at making films about ancient and/or religious characters also failed was its sole focus on entertainment and commercial gain.

### *Religious authenticity in Solomon*

Ambitious epic films have upheld their claim to authenticity by the intensity and expansiveness of the research their filmmakers have undertaken. Cecil B. DeMille, for example, credited as the father of religious epics in the Western context, consulted nine hundred sources in his making of *The Ten Commandments* (Solomon, 2001:157). Although the scope of *Kingdom of Solomon* is nowhere close to that of *The Ten Commandments*, it does draw from extensive consultation with religious scholars as well as international cinematic experts in its ambitions to create an authentic narrative from the sacred text of the Qur’an. In this regard, one of the distinctive features of the film is an impressive website in Arabic, English and Persian. An archive of Persian articles were available under the research section of the website.<sup>5</sup> These included just under 100 pages of resources in 11 documents presenting an overview of the range of materials used by the religious research team, referred to as the Taha Qur’anic Research Group.<sup>6</sup> This research team had undertaken extensive research for two years before the

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<sup>5</sup>See <http://kingdomofsolomon.com>. I had downloaded these resources on 11 January 2013 but they are no longer available online.

<sup>6</sup> These are the titles of the documents: 1. Survey of verses referring to Prophet Solomon in the Qur’an. 2. The chronological order of the Qur’anic verses referring to Solomon and the reasons for it. 3. The foundational theories on the Kingdom of Solomon. 4. The countenance of Satan. 5. Reasons for the physical appearance of the Jinns and the Devils. 6. Comparison of the discussions on Solomon in Islam and other sacred books. 7. The importance of engaging with the story of Solomon in contemporary

shooting of the film had even begun (Isfahanian, 2013). For example, the online research document entitled “Theoretical Discussions on the Kingdom of Solomon”, argues that it is imperative to rely on authentic texts as the main source for understanding the events surrounding Solomon’s life because of the alterations within the sacred texts of certain religions. It concludes that we need to refer to the Qur’an because it is the “most authentic, genuine, comprehensive religious, ethical and historical text that is accepted not only amongst all religious groups within Islam but also the unbiased of the world” (Taha Research Group, n.d.). This concern regarding the alteration of earlier sacred texts is a recurrent theme within the film.

This emphasis on the authenticity of the narratives is evident in the impressive range of sources that the research group claims to have consulted. In the same document quoted above, the introduction states that with the alteration and falsification of religious texts of certain religions, it becomes even more important to rely on authentic texts and the core source. Even though the religious traditions have not been named it is clear that this is a reference to the other two monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity who share the figure of Solomon in their religious texts. As such, right from the outset, the narrative establishes its departure from the Judaeo-Christian narratives of Solomon. It continues to argue that the Qur’an is the most authentic, genuine, comprehensive religious, ethical and historical text that is accepted amongst all religious groups within Islam and of course those who are honest and just. The authors locate their approach by invoking a famous saying of the Prophet known as the *hadith thaqalayn*, which refers to the two weighty things the Prophet is believed to have

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times. 8. Amir al-Mu’minin Ali (AH) the teacher of the prophets. 9. A brief survey of the story of Solomon. 10. Why is Jerusalem called Illiya? 11. The worlds and their chronological order in the thought of Mulla Mehdi Naraghi and Mulla Ahmad Naraghi.

said he would leave behind for his community.<sup>7</sup> The Shi‘a recording of these two weighty things is the Qur’an and the Prophet’s family. Accordingly, the authors argue that after the Qur’an, it is the authentic hadiths of the divine guides (*hadiyan-e elahi*), that is the Shi‘i imams and the *ahl al-bayt* (People of the household of the Prophet)<sup>8</sup>, whose words equally demand our reflection, and so “by God’s command we are to obey his Prophet’s bidding as evident in verse 7 of chapter 59: And whatsoever the messenger giveth you, take it. And whatsoever he forbiddeth, abstain (from it)...”

The care and attention given to this recourse to non-Qur’anic sources is heavily emphasised. For example in preparing just one of the eleven documents, the authors claim that 442 volumes of hadith in 187 titles, as well as 1010 volumes in 205 titles of *tafsir* (hermeneutics of the Qur’an) from the Shi‘i and general sources were consulted. On the other hand, for its part, the film’s cinematic expertise was outsourced to Hong Kong, which eventually won it three of its five awards at the Fajr International Film Festival (best music, best special effects, best sound). (Mozaffari, 2010).

In my interview with the producer, Mojtaba Faravardesh (August 26, 2013), he explained that in creating the filmic narrative, the producers and the research teams, including the Qur’anic and historical research group, worked closely with each other and created a timeline from Adam to Jesus, marking their relevant dates on the topmost line. Underneath this, they included the rulership of kings, underneath that civilisations, underneath that the structures and architecture of civilisations, with the final line incorporating the findings of new sciences such as the developments in DNA, or

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<sup>7</sup> All Muslims agree that at Ghadir Khum the Prophet had mentioned leaving behind ‘two precious things’. However, the second of these items is disputed. Shi‘i authors reported them as being ‘the Qur’an and his family’, whereas Sunni narrators stated them to be ‘the Qur’an and his tradition, known as Sunna’. For further discussion on these claims see Amir Moezzi (2015).

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima, Ali, his son-in-law and cousin and the first Shi‘i imam, and their two sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn. For further information on the *ahl al-bayt* see Farhad Daftary (2015).

archaeological findings. This apparently six-metre long timeline provided them with a comparative perspective in creating their storyline.

The Qur'anic research group was headed by Hojjat al-Islam Saeed Isfahanian, a cleric. In our meeting in August 2013, he explained that in the first instance, it was important to arrive at the main text and they, therefore, started with the Qur'an. Isfahanian considers the approach to the creation of the narrative itself distinct from other Iranian religious films. According to him, unlike other religious films that began with historical texts, in *Kingdom of Solomon*, they began with the Qur'an, then the narratives, then the exegeses, then history and only further down the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. The centrality of the Qur'an was maintained throughout the process. In this way, he said, the film was a departure from dominant ideas about Solomon not just from the West but also within Muslim societies, where, too, ideas about Solomon are based heavily on Judaeo-Christian texts. As such, Isfahanian considers this film to be the start of a new movement, which attempts to rewrite history from the depths of the Qur'an.

Sixty-eight verses in 9 chapters of the Qur'an were identified by the research group as direct verses referring to Solomon, or relevant verses such as those on jinns and demons. In addition to these 68 verses, because Solomon was a prophet, messenger and king, all verses relating to these topics in the Qur'an were also studied. Then, only authentic (*sahih*) narratives compatible with the text of the Qur'an were considered, and with whose help they could piece together the chronology of Solomon's life.

My examination of the sources revealed a strong reliance on accounts related from the twelve imams. When I asked about the use of non-Shi'i sources, the answer was positive. For example, they had referred to Sunni sources in ascertaining Solomon's flying object, popularly known as Solomon's carpet. The word *basat*, he

said, had been explained better in these sources as wooden planks strung together. The artistic group then creatively interpreted this as a wooden ship.

Similarly, since the starting point had been the Qur'an, the "falsifications in the Judaeo-Christian texts could be easily contradicted, such as the enmity of Solomon's brothers towards him". Isfahanian explained that the previous scriptures were right about Solomon having brothers but as the Qur'an (34:13) demonstrates, not only was there no animosity between the brothers, but they also worked for him. Indeed, where the Qur'an says, "Work ye, sons of David with thanks!", this is a reference to a practical gratefulness and the fact that the brothers were working for him. As such, Isfahanian continued, the Qur'anic film rectifies the prevailing narratives about Solomon and his brothers. However, in filling in some of the gaps for which Islamic sources were not available, some borrowing as artistic license had been considered permissible. Isfahanian explained that they saw no obstacle in using the names of the brothers and the historical scenes as stated in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures as long as they did not contradict the Qur'an. Taking artistic license is almost inevitable even in films that strive for authenticity of their narratives, such as Cecil B. de Mille's fictitious yet plausible conjectures for filling in the gaps in the Biblical texts such as "Moses's upbringing in the Egyptian court, his love for Nefretiri, his personal enmity with Rameses, the presence of a (late-Bronze Age) Trojan embassy at the (late-Bronze Age) Pharaoh's court" (Solomon, 2001: 157).

Discussing the ancient world in cinema, Solomon asserts that the most vital concept to keep in mind when viewing a film about antiquity is that film directors are artists, and as artists they have every right to adapt, change, or eliminate matters of history in deference to their cinematic art...cinematic antiquity belongs first to the demands of film and second to the demands of history (Solomon, 2001: 32). However,

for the producers of this Qur'anic film it is religious authenticity that is crucial to the filmic narrative and there is a conscious effort to ensure this outcome. Consequently, the Qur'an is repeatedly emphasised as the primary source of the narrative, eschewing even sources that would traditionally inform these stories such as the Israiliyyat.

Nonetheless, in addressing the demands of the medium, it appears that attention has focused on heavy investments in cinematic techniques such as CGI, Dolby sound and special effects. Indeed, some of the scenes in the film resemble those from Hollywood blockbusters such as *Harry Potter* (Dementors), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (fight scenes), *Alien* (jinns coming out of the body) and *The Lord of the Rings* (defending the castle in Jerusalem). In the context of Western epics, Solomon explains that “To our preconditioned modern eyes – so conditioned since 1907 – an ‘ancient’ film often needs the pictorial splendor and broad scope in order to look as if it is really taking place in antiquity” (Solomon, 2001: 34). Even though Iranian epics do not have equivalent precedents because, as earlier discussed, the genre is a recent development within Iranian cinema, they are arguably burdened with the existing “pictorial splendour” of Western cinema, which might partly explain the Hollywood imitations and the reliance on Hong Kong expertise. This outsourcing of expertise, however, was limited to only certain aspects deemed appropriate for *Kingdom of Solomon*. Bahrani, the director, explained in an interview that it would have been impossible to employ Hollywood scriptwriters for this film. Regardless of how skilled they were in their art, the Westerner's distance from the magnificence of the subject would make it impossible to create the right mood for the film. He continues that the Aristotelian drama is an inappropriate form for a Qur'anic story (*Fars News*, 2010b).

In any case, *Kingdom of Solomon* is a big departure from the usual low-budget art or commercial films that define much of Iranian cinema. However, the significant

investments in digital technology and special effects does not appear to have been sufficient in striking that balance between authenticity and dramatic effectiveness. The producer dismissed the initial low ticket sales as a result of the weak marketing for the film. The subsequent boost in sales was explained as the power of word of mouth from those who had gone to see the film. Audiences flocked to the cinema and within a short period of time, the film broke the sales record of that year for the number of tickets sales per day (*Tabnak*, 2010). However, the marketing strategies employed for the screenings included half-price tickets for students and the arrangement for 100,000 Tehrani school pupils to view this film (*Fars News*, 2010a). Moreover, on certain religious dates, which commemorate the death of a religious figure, all cinemas throughout the country are closed. However, when this coincided with the screening of *Kingdom of Solomon*, the cinemas remained open, making it the only film screening throughout the country on that day (*Fars News*, 2010c).

## Conclusions

The comparison between the Iranian and the Western context illustrated the importance of the socio-political context in the shaping of cultural productions such as religious epics. This was not simply confined to the limited access to resources of the Iranian industry but also the sensitivities surrounding both the subject and the medium itself. However, these were not the sole reasons for the late emergence of religious epics in Iranian cinema. The first films under the patronage of the Qajar kings at the turn of the twentieth century remained private without any impact on the subsequent Iranian films. The weakened tradition of Iranian performing arts had very little to offer as well. The emergence of Iranian cinema under the Pahlavis was seen as a modernising project with

no interest from either the industry or the state to utilise it for religious narratives. The Islamic Republic's many efforts in creating an Islamic cinema appears to have finally resulted in the creation of a genre that can address these ambitions.

One of the main challenges of creating these religious epics, however, has been about maintaining the balance between religious and historical authenticity, and dramatic effectiveness. Both *Imam Ali* and *Kingdom of Solomon* claimed authenticity of their narratives through the resources they had consulted. However, *Kingdom of Solomon* went to great lengths in demonstrating these claims, including the formal establishment of a Qur'anic research group and preparing public research documents. *Kingdom of Solomon* differentiates itself from other religious films by claiming the centrality of the Qur'an in informing the understanding of the story and the shaping of the final production, with other religious texts being secondary in the order of the consulted sources. As such, it is not simply because the film is based on one of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an that the film is labelled as "Qur'anic film" but also due to the very creation of the film being derived from the Qur'an. The Qur'anic film is an ambitious project that aims to achieve a number of social, religious and political objectives. Here, I demonstrated how it attempts to present an authentic and original text devoid of any contamination by untrustworthy sources.

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